Kehillath Israel: The First 100 Years

Honoring The Unbroken Faith That Links the Generations
Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1  1917-1927
Testaments and Testimonials....................................................... 3
Annie Davis

CHAPTER 2  1927-1937
The Loveable Sage........................................................................... 13
David Starr

CHAPTER 3  1937-1947
Roots of Identity............................................................................... 21
Ruth Feinsilver Wolf

CHAPTER 4  1947-1957
Stability and Growth in Changing Times............................................. 39
David Farbman

CHAPTER 5  1957-1967
What We Value................................................................................ 65
Susan Wolf Ditkoff

CHAPTER 6  1967-1977
Small Moments on the Bimah........................................................... 91
Paul Greenberg

CHAPTER 7  1977-1987
How KI Won the Cold War................................................................. 103
Ira Stoll

CHAPTER 8  1987-1997
A Decade of Change........................................................................... 113
Kadimah Michelson

CHAPTER 9  1997-2007
The Return to Joy............................................................................... 125
Jerome Groopman

CHAPTER 10  2007-2017
“Mama, There’s No Yigdal Here.”...................................................... 137
Hadasah Margolis

Acknowledgments............................................................................. 154

Afterword Towards the Future: KI’s Contrarian Spirit...................... 150
William Hamilton and David E. Williams
Junior Congregation Shabbat was an annual institution at KI when I was growing up in the 1960s. Each spring, our congregation of 12 to 18 year olds, which ordinarily met in the chapel, took charge of the “upstairs service” for one entire Shabbat morning. We sat on the bimah, led the davening, read the full traditional Torah and Haftarah portions, and announced pages. One of us even delivered a sermon. Afterwards, Rabbi Manuel Saltzman invariably informed the congregation that it had witnessed the “future leaders of the Jewish community,” whom KI was in the process of training, and that, from his perspective, the future looked hopeful indeed.

They hoped that it would be a traditional (their word was “Orthodox”) congregation, and that traditional Jewish life, then centered in Chelsea, Boston’s West End, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, would take root in an upscale suburban town. They hoped to be able to construct a grand synagogue on Harvard Street, as evidence of how far Jews had come in their decades since immigration, and hoped that it would someday be filled to capacity. Most of all, they hoped to educate their children, so that they and their descendants might likewise grow up as committed and practicing Jews.

These hopes help to explain why education became so central at KI, especially in the post-war years. In my day, the congregation boasted a ten-hour per week Hebrew school, well-trained Hebrew speaking teachers, and principals who went on to become leaders in the field of Jewish education. Although KI had its own Jewish high school, eager students were encouraged to go on to the more intensive Prozdor high school at what was then known as Hebrew Teachers College, another ten-hour per week (or more) commitment. KI also offered a wide range of other youth activities: a text-based program developed by the Jewish Theological Seminary called Leaders Training Fellowship (LTF); pre-USY and USY youth groups (one year, my USY advisor was Dennis Prager, today a well-known writer and talk show host); and, of course, youth services at different levels, including the children’s congregation and our junior congregation, where we learned synagogue skills for Shabbat, holiday, and high holiday services. For a few years, KI even hosted a Talmud class for young people every Shabbat afternoon, making use of the chapel’s magnificent rabbinic library.

From the day it was chartered in 1917, KI was all about encouraging hopes of this kind. Its founders hoped that Brookline, then a community of fewer than one thousand Jewish souls, would sustain a new congregation.
KI’s leadership was enormously invested in the congregation’s educational initiatives. “Youth is the object of our constant concern, for we all realize that our future, as a movement and as a people, depends on our ability to solve the problems which vex our young people today,” Rabbi Saltzman had declared to a gathering of the United Synagogue in 1950, before he was called to KI. His insistence that “our young people must be provided with leaders to guide them effectively” shaped the congregation’s priorities.

Key members of the congregation reinforced those priorities. Harry Kraft, father of New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, a former president of the congregation, longtime board member, and champion of young people at KI, led the services for young children every Shabbat. The love that he radiated instilled in many a KI youngster love for Judaism as a whole. Mr. Kraft, as we called him, was not himself a rabbi, but his devotion to the congregation, to Jewish learning, to melodious davening, and to the entire Boston Jewish community (he was also president of the Associated Synagogues) proved infectious. He helped set a tone for the congregation as a whole. The Margolises, the Goulds, the Lapiduses, the Dobrusins, and many other lay members exemplified the central role that Jewish education played at KI. The innumerable volunteer hours that they devoted to educational initiatives and programs shaped both the life of the congregation and the destinies of many KI children—myself included.

Those who had the good fortune to be raised at KI have for decades been disproportionately represented among the leadership of the Jewish community. In 1963, the congregation itself boasted “that more of its sons completed their studies at the Seminary to become rabbis and leaders of American Judaism than those of any other Conservative congregation in America.” Today, KI’s sons—and daughters—include some of the foremost rabbis, scholars, educators, communal professionals, and lay leaders in Jewish life. Some of them still live in Brookline, some (like me) in nearby communities, some across the United States and the rest of the diaspora, and some in Israel. Wherever I travel, I encounter them. What unites us, notwithstanding the passage of many years and a host of other differences, is a shared belief, rooted in what we learned and experienced at KI, that the future of the Jewish community depends upon us: what we say and do and teach. Uniting us, too, are shared memories—of friends, mentors, classes, programs, services, Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations, high holidays in the tent, Torah portions that we learned how to chant, and, yes, of Junior Congregation Shabbat, where some of us first discovered what it meant to lead.
This volume, marking the centennial of Congregation Kehillath Israel, is all about shared memories. While not a full-scale history, it offers wonderful glimpses of days gone by at the synagogue, as seen through surviving photographs, newspaper articles, and other memorabilia, and as recalled by congregants, young and old.

The rise of KI coincided with the arrival of Jews in Brookline, following World War I, and the town’s metamorphosis into a “streetcar suburb” for upwardly mobile Jews. Whereas previous Boston Jewish communities—including, Chelsea, Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan—lasted but a generation or two before they declined, Brookline’s Jewish community proved far more fortunate. A century later, Brookline remains at the heart of Boston Jewry, with more Jews (16,000-20,000) than in Vermont and New Hampshire combined. KI has both contributed to Brookline’s vibrant Jewish life and benefited from it. With its prime location on Harvard Street opposite the historic Edward Devotion School and close by the home where President John F. Kennedy was born, the synagogue has long served as a symbol of the town’s enduring Jewish presence.

The rise of KI also coincided with the rapid growth of Judaism’s Conservative Movement. Between the world wars and into the 1960s, it became the fastest growing of all of America’s Jewish religious movements, a comfortable midpoint between Orthodoxy and Reform. From the outset, KI represented the “traditional wing” of this Conservative Movement. Its first rabbi, Louis M. Epstein, held traditional Orthodox ordination, as well as multiple degrees from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and was a scholar of rabbinic literature with a worldwide reputation. The focus of KI, he believed, should be on education and learning, with a healthy respect for Jewish law. As a result, unlike many Conservative synagogues, the synagogue had no organ. It introduced only a small number of changes into the traditional liturgy and it followed the traditional Torah cycle rather than the triennial one.

KI’s membership and influence peaked during the baby boom years that followed World War II. Brookline, at that time, became something of a magnet for young, upwardly mobile Jews. They returned from the war or from college, married, and took out mortgages on homes in the vicinity of Coolidge Corner. Brookline’s proximity to transportation, excellent public schools, and low crime rate helped lure young Jews, as did the Jewish shops on Harvard Street. KI’s excellent Hebrew School was an important factor as well, located so close to the Devotion School that, after school, even young children could fuel up with a candy bar at Irving’s Toy & Card Shop and then cross Harvard Street on their own. The dependable crossing guard kept KI’s children safe.

During these heady post-war years, KI hummed with activities all week long. Besides Hebrew School, there
was Sisterhood, Brotherhood, KI Married Set, Hadassah, youth groups, Scout Troops, reading groups, study groups, daily and Shabbat services, and an array of special events. Friday nights, during the shorter winter months, featured well-attended “Late Friday Night” services where girls celebrated their Bat Mitzvah. Boys became Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat mornings. Lunches, dinners, and receptions filled the synagogue’s halls. And each Shabbat, following services, the entire congregation gathered together for a generous kiddush.

KI also served as a community gathering place. It made its spacious sanctuary available for demonstrations on behalf of Israel, Soviet Jews, Jews in Arab lands, and other causes. Luminaries like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke from KI’s pulpit. So did Cardinal Cushing. If walls could talk, KI’s would recount the story of Brookline Jewry.

By the late 1970s, though, KI was in trouble. Brookline’s demographics had changed. The Conservative Movement had changed. KI, with more members dying each year than joining, knew that it needed to change, too. But what exactly to change—how to make room for innovation without disrupting tradition—became the subject of a decades-long debate.

Today, as KI reaches its century mark, that debate has been resolved. The congregation is once again looking expectantly toward the future. On Harvard Street, construction crews are transforming KI’s historic buildings into a “multi-generational campus in the heart of Jewish Brookline.” KI has joined forces with exciting new partners to “build Jewish identity, promote Jewish learning and literacy, and increase overall engagement with Israel and the wider Jewish community.”

In short, a twenty-first century synagogue is taking shape at KI. From my perspective, the future looks hopeful indeed.

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Introduction

Building Kehillath Israel

In July 1924, Charles Titus, writing on behalf of Sargent and Company, a hardware manufacturer in New Haven, Connecticut, agreed to provide “the finish hardware requirements for the Temple Kehillath Israel” at a price of $1,800. He was motivated based on his relationship with Joseph Rudnick, then synagogue president. Mr. Titus continued “we also do this on account of the fact that your concern are so loyal to our line.”

A great deal is packed into this short, two paragraph letter. One might take it as a positive omen that the hardware for the synagogue building came in at a multiple of 18, the numerical equivalent of chai, the Hebrew word for life. Certainly the seemingly philo-Semitic sentiment is tinged with an edge that must have felt quite familiar to Jews of an era marked by nativism and anti-immigration fervor. It is also one of countless examples of a small detail that speaks volumes. Hardware was essential to the construction of the building that was erected between 1922 and 1924. Without such items, there would have been no physical structure for a place that has served as our spiritual home for a century.

Spending the last few years researching and writing about the history of KI has been more than a privilege. It has been an opportunity to understand and connect to this institution that for over 22 years has provided my family a home, a livelihood, and a community. As I explored the materials and as we uncovered thousands more items (huge shout-out to our amazing research intern Molly Brown), we sorted the findings into salient categories: Education, Leadership, Activities, Religious Policy, Israel, etc. What questions to ask were clear—beginning with the most obvious: what brought us to this point? How had the foundation been laid, altered, shifted, developed, abandoned, and rediscovered such that KI is as strong and optimistic at the end of its first century as it was at the beginning of it?

Certain items kept luring me back. The communication noted above and other artifacts continued to draw my interest—such as architectural specs from 1946 to 1948 for what was then known as the Community House. This is the building that currently houses the Epstein Auditorium, the Library, and parts of the two schools. Given everything that would transpire over the course of 100 years, these few items might seem insignificant, but I kept thinking about the building, which both literally and figuratively has provided the space for KI to be KI. How that truism would be realized over the decades would vary, but as long as the physical structure held, anything could be possible.
KI meant and continues to mean different things to different people—an enormous strength, even during periods of uncertainty. That it is a home for children, scholars, prayer, artists, Zionists, presidents, and pundits is a testament to its flexibility and endurance. As it grew, often in ways that were unwieldy, it provided niches for all connections to Jewish life—no matter how tangential. I remember our first Rosh Hashanah here in 1995, exploring the spaces around Landers Hall, figuring out how the different locations were connected, learning to use the back stairs from the far side of Landers to access the service in Epstein. Each physical space provided opportunities to pursue an interest, an expression of what KI could mean to an individual or a group. Long before our current “ecosystem of engagement,” this reality was manifest in the physical plant.

Appreciating this connection between the actual space and emotional/spiritual/intellectual endeavors has been heartening on several levels. The “ever widening circle” is really just coming full circle—KI is what it always was—a place where there were many paths to being Jewish, being connected, being part of the community in ways that were authentic, substantive, and meaningful.

Recounting the past of our synagogue mirrors and propels this paradigm. Just as the building has allowed for all of these spaces, the story of KI is innumerable stories. Some are legends—the rabbis, the instrumental leaders, the visionaries, and the luminaries. There were thousands of others who perhaps are not known to us but were integral—indeed the hardware that held the place together. Records reveal attendance of 200 at this program, 600 at that youth dance, the need to erect a tent on the high holidays just for Junior Congregation. Who are the people behind these numbers?

Lists abound. The aliya from Yom Kippur, 1943 (phone numbers included). Reverend Solomon Reisner’s large black address book that held the Hebrew names of hundreds of men who comprised the daily Chapel Minyan. Records from teachers in the religious schools—grades, attendance, activities. Financial data of annual expenditures and income. Donors that number in the hundreds annually. Yahrzeit lists. Purim celebrations from the 1940s to today. Class photos from the four religious schools. Protests on the steps of the building. Sisterhood and Brotherhood members at dozens of weekly activities. My personal favorite are the musical productions—The Golden Door, All Those in Favor, To Her We Sing, My Mother’s Candles, Seven Golden Buttons. No small undertaking, with casts of tens, sets, original words and music.
The rest we can try to imagine. How many people did it take to stuff envelopes in the decades before email? What of those who truly embodied dor l’dor as newcomers became old timers who welcomed the next generation? I love thinking about Edith Gold, who ran the office from the 1940s to the 1970s. Who could estimate the number of people she affected?

While we certainly have ample evidence of the impact of the rabbis, what of their wives? Perhaps nothing captured my attention more than even the slightest reference to those who held the post prior to me. Their husbands were the religious leaders of KI from 1925 to 1986, but what of Mrs. Epstein, Mrs. Nadich, and Mrs. Saltzman? Certainly the wives of the assistant rabbis, cantors, and those who served briefly prior to our arrival deserve acknowledgment, but it is these three women whom the record acknowledges as the rebbetzins of KI. Yes, I use the honorific adhered to in their time, although in my imagined conversations with them, we go by first names—Minnie, Hadassah, and Esther. Much of what I can glean of their lives comes from the groups they led, the lectures they gave, and the photos of the events they attended. Es het Chayil does not begin to estimate their worth to this congregation and their contribution to its longevity.

The Sisterhood classes, the Torah Fund luncheons, the meals in their homes. Mrs. Epstein, Mrs. Nadich, and Mrs. Saltzman did more than attend for over 60 years. They led. As Jonathan Sarna and other historians have noted, synagogues truly got two for the price of one when they hired a rabbi. There is historic suggestion that some women of the pre-egalitarian era sought to marry rabbis as it was a means to influence the Jewish world in ways that were more than acceptable but revered. Certainly these three women were learned and engaged. They were looked to as guides—how to dress, what to read, how to run a Jewish household.
Mrs. Saltzman held a masters in Judaic Studies and taught weekly classes well into the 21st century. She called me soon after we arrived in Brookline, deeply concerned that she would be ‘stepping on my toes’ if she continued her weekly Talmud class for the Sisterhood. I assured her I would be thrilled if she would do so. The brief conversation provided a glimpse into the different universes we inhabited. The stories of Minnie, Hadassah, and Esther are just a few of the thousands of threads that comprise the tapestry of our past.

* * *

We are thrilled to be able to present some of these stories in *KI: The First Hundred Years*. The book is organized chronologically. Each chapter explores a decade of the synagogue’s past. We begin with the briefest of overviews and a timeline that intertwines the histories of the world, the Jews, and our congregation. We then present a representative sample of people, objects, documents, and events from that decade. Access to these materials began with our archive at the American Jewish Historical Society and then grew as we foraged the building, personal holdings, and virtual resources. We uncovered genuine hidden treasures. For some decades we had a thousand items from which to choose and for others, no more than thirty. The result, however incomplete, is here before you.

To create a richer tableau, we are going deeper and wider. In each chapter, we invited an author to select a single item and reflect on its illustrative power for the decade under consideration. The results are gems: a bookcase, a Brotherhood breakfast, a gathering on KI’s steps. All serve as launching pads to explore what KI means to its members. We are blessed in our congregation to have countless individuals of prodigious talent; selecting just ten was difficult. Our authors range in age from 22 to 90 and each has a deep and personal connection to the synagogue.

The process was eerily familiar. All wrote poignantly of their item or object or person and then contextualized as we had requested. My initial critique was always the same. “Less about the wider world; the book is about KI,” I implored. Only after reading drafts of all ten essays did it occur to me that the significance to KI could not, nor should not, be distinguished from the broader historic or contemporary landscape. That reality reflected both the shul’s importance as well as the incursion of external forces into our daily lives. This dialectic is the interplay of our congregation and the Jewish people over the course of the last century. That KI sits at the nexus of our complex identities as Jews and Americans invokes Brandeis’s observation that to be good Americans, we must be better Jews. KI created the opportunity for its members to be better Jews. In their final versions, these 10 essays provide depth, warmth, and a sense of just how special our community is.

To go wider, we employ the magic of technology and invite you to visit the companion website, www.congki.org/first100, structured along the same schema as the book. Here you can do more than look at the items or read the essays, but comment on them and upload your own artifacts, thereby making telling the story of KI an ongoing, personal, and interactive process.

There is one additional chapter at the end. Rabbi Hamilton and current synagogue president David Williams consider the upcoming decades and imagine what the future holds based on current initiatives. No doubt the hardware for the current construction project will cost more than $1,800. Replacement value in current dollars is $25,270. It still seems like a small price to pay to provide the foundation for the next hundred years.

Debra Block is an historian and educational consultant. She is married to Rabbi William Hamilton, who became the Mara D’atra of Kehillath Israel in 1995. They are the parents of Avital and Kobi.